

# 'Language is the Eye of Society': Edmund Burke on the Origins of the Polite and the Civil

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Language is the eye of Society, without it we could very ill signify our wants for our own relief, and by no means could communicate our knowledge, for the amusement or amendment of our fellow creatures; and therefore without it the comforts and delights of life could not be enjoyed, no conveyance of learning, of chastisement, of praise, of solace, scarce virtue be practised, friendship subsist, nor religion ever taught and defended.

Preamble to the Laws of the Academy of *Belles Lettres*  
(Trinity College, Dublin, 24 February 1747/8).

Throughout his career, Edmund Burke used a variety of languages of social analysis.<sup>1</sup> These included the dialects of 'civic' critique – 'civic humanist', 'republican', etc. – that have received sustained attention in recent years.<sup>2</sup> 'Standing armies', 'jobbers' and 'factions' appear frequently in his discussions of America and India, France and Ireland. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, the civic critique had been significantly altered by the languages of 'politeness' and benevolism, and by works of travel literature and comparative history. Especially in his pre-parliamentary career (c.1747/8–67), Burke fashioned these into a new, 'civil' critique that would be central to his response to the revolution in France. There, the rhetoric of 'chivalry' expressed not reaction, but a defence of European 'civility', of social progress built on the 'honour ethic'.<sup>3</sup> This set the

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Eighteenth-Century Ireland Society Conference (NUI Maynooth, May 2002). I remain grateful to the Irish Legal History Society for their bursary for 2001, allowing me to visit the Burke archives.
- 2 See especially, J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975). Pocock's adoption of the term 'civic humanism' is unfortunate. The civic traditions were not necessarily humanist, nor humanists civic.
- 3 This ethic did not involve that 'damn'd thing' duelling, which he criticised and once narrowly avoided, but the 'imperfect' obligations of nobility, clergy and landed property. See James Kelly, *'That Damn'd Thing called Honour': Duelling in Ireland 1570–1860* (Cork, 1995), p.79 and J. Riddy, 'Warren Hastings: Scotland's Benefactor?' in G. Carnall and C. Nicholson, *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings: Papers from a Bicentenary Commemoration* (Edinburgh, 1989), p.47.

Whig reformer Burke against political radicalism, but left him in the mainstream of enlightened thought.

## I

Polite culture, both in Britain and on the continent, was rooted in fundamental changes in European manners, commerce and law. The gradual development of a new conception of the state brought to an end, more by exhaustion than enlightenment, the conflicts of the long seventeenth century. This early modern state was organised around a centralisation of political power within its territories and a comparatively greater tolerance of social divisions. The resulting 'balance of power', externally and internally, proved remarkably successful. In practice, the new state relied on a regular or 'standing' army supported by, and itself supporting, a higher degree of taxation. But the strength of the 'national' state was also seen as effecting a more uniform, universal application of law and many praised its attendant political and commercial benefits. In Britain, these changes took firm root after 1688 with the establishment of a Bank of England and a system of national debt in place by century's end. For all its innovation, and lingering political animosities, the 'Glorious' and 'Financial' revolutions brought to much of Britain an era of great prosperity and peace.

Such changes, and even this affluence, were, however, sources of no little anxiety. The participatory or positive liberty of the 'ancients' continued to emphasise 'virtue' or public-spiritedness, but participation was largely martial and limited to men of landed property with a very real share in the state. To supporters of this view, the standing army and the commercial successes of Augustan Britain, along with the political patronage that accompanied the new state, seemed to confirm their worst fears. Opportunities for civic participation were thought to be declining and the 'luxury' that followed commerce continued to be seen, as it had been for centuries of classical and Christian thought, as 'effeminate' and 'corrupting'. The 'fictions' of credit, paper currencies and stock holding, the bought loyalty of a salaried army, the 'dependence' on public debt and the spoils of empire, all fuelled these concerns.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the liberty of the 'moderns' came from the very *increase* of state powers, by the distance of government from the governed. It eroded, or circumvented, the power of local nobility and increased social mobility, particularly as offered by greater levels of social and financial commerce.<sup>5</sup> In jurisprudence, too, there was an increasingly

4 Among the most influential and zealous of the 'ancients' were Irish 'commonwealthmen', including William Molyneux, John Trenchard, and John Toland. Irish Whiggism remains inadequately explored, but see Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstances of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, MA, 1959), especially pp.88-176.

5 As an important source of self-understanding, the increased universalism of the state suggested a more subjective, autonomous and legalistic concept of the individual. This arguably facilitated both liberation and 'alienation'. See Larry Siedentop, 'Political Theory and Ideology: The Case of the State' in David Miller and Siedentop (eds), *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford, 1983), pp.53-73.



important distinction drawn between 'perfect' juridical-political duties (or rights) – backed by public sanctions and deemed indispensable for social order – and the 'imperfect' demands made on social institutions depending essentially on beneficence.<sup>6</sup>

It was in this complex clash of 'ancient' and 'modern' that the 'culture of politeness' emerged. The order made possible by the modern state, urbanisation and commerce, and the relative decline of relationships of status threw other, more voluntary and contractual social practices and institutions into relief. The new ethos found expression in the conversational coffee-houses and inspired the growth of the periodical press. In the move from civic to civil, public virtue was also reconceived in less explicitly political and martial terms. 'Manners' as well as 'militias' became an important term of analysis. These social changes are perhaps best exemplified in the work of Joseph Addison and Irishman Richard Steele, the forces behind *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. The resulting 'commerce of discourse' was at once more urban and urbane and friendship, rather than status, was the paradigm of the new organisations and clubs. Though polite society was not secular, it was hoped a more conversational culture might mollify the religious and political 'enthusiasms' of the previous century. At the level of philosophy, Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, expressed the underlying 'benevolism' of much polite thought and the rehabilitation of human passions from their association with egoism. Indeed, while he was anxious about the artifice of politeness, his own moral theory was one of deep interdependence and sociability. The *sensus communis* was not merely 'common sense', though it was also that, but a sense of the commons.

This neo-Ciceronian stress on *social* commerce increasingly legitimised economic activities as well. Polite culture was, in this sense, conducive to the development of a 'natural' aristocracy of the 'middling ranks'. It did not, however, eclipse the values associated with the hereditary aristocracy and landed property. For many, it was only the 'ballast' of a landed order and the 'moral economy' that provided security from the 'fictions' of profit and personality so common to commerce. The proprietors of the land were a sort of 'natural', agrarian militia, in stark contrast to the mercenary 'monied' men. Unlike the movable wealth of trade, the profits of immovable property were, it was argued, returned to and 'cultured' local communities. At mid-century, Montesquieu stressed, too, the continuing importance of the honour ethic and the pursuit of public 'glory'.<sup>7</sup> 'Honour', he wrote, 'sets all the parts of the body politic in motion, and by its very action connects them; thus each individual advances the

6 See generally, Seán Patrick Donlan, 'Beneficence Acting by a Rule: Edmund Burke on Law, History and Manners', *Irish Jurist*, 36 (2001), p.227.

7 An excellent analysis is Richard Bourke, 'Edmund Burke and Enlightenment Sociability: Justice, Honour and the Principles of Government', *History of Political Thought*, 21 (2000), p.632.

public good, while he only thinks of promoting his own interests'.<sup>8</sup> In this way, honour harnessed native interest and ambition, in good faith and bad, for the public good. If the obligations underlying the moral economy were admittedly 'imperfect' – in both the practical and juridical senses – they remained a meaningful attempt at balancing private and public interest.<sup>9</sup> The artifice of culture, it seemed, was natural to man.

## II

Unlike much of Ireland, the Dublin into which Burke was born was an active participant in polite society.<sup>10</sup> On an intellectual level, Irish writers like Jonathan Swift and Francis Hutcheson served at once to enrich and complicate the conclusions of British politeness.<sup>11</sup> Periodicals like James Arbuckle's *Dublin Weekly Journal* and George Faulkner's *Dublin Journal* and *Dublin Post Boy* became increasingly important sources of information and public debate. Burke's father was a lawyer with the High Court of the Exchequer and appears to have converted to the established church, in all likelihood to pursue a career otherwise prohibited by the penal laws. His mother's family were among the last of County Cork's propertied Catholics and while 'Ned' and his brothers were brought up in their father's faith, his sister was raised a Catholic. Burke's earliest education was conducted, possibly in Irish, in a hedge-school in his mother's native Blackwater valley. He then attended the Quaker Abraham Shackleton's school in Ballitore, County Kildare, becoming a lifelong friend of the schoolmaster's son, Richard. These various experiences would incline him towards both religious and political latitudinarianism, implying tolerance of diversity within the institutional limits of established church and state.

- 8 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Thomas Nugent (tr.) (1752; Chicago, 1952), bk.iii.7. Like politeness, honour, whether 'true' or 'false', could be 'joined with the force of the laws, ... [and] lead us to the end of government as well as virtue itself'. Ibid., bk.iii.6. See also *ibid.*, bk.iv.2.
- 9 Cf Thomas Bartlett, 'An End to Moral Economy: The Irish Militia Disturbances of 1793' in C.H.E. Philpin, *Nationalism and Popular Protest in Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996), pp.191-218 and E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), p.76.
- 10 See Toby Barnard, 'The Languages of Politeness and Sociability in Eighteenth-Century Ireland' in D. George Boyce, Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan (eds.), *Political Discourse in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Houndmills, 2001), pp.193-221.
- 11 The works of Swift and Hutcheson are included in Burke's library catalogues. One catalogue, the 'Catalogue of the Library of the late Right Hon Edmund Burke' is in Oxford's Bodleian Library, Ms. Eng. Misc. d. 722. Another is reprinted in Seamus Deane (ed.), *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons: Volume 8 – Politicians* (London, 1973), pp.179-241.



The record of Burke's engagement with polite culture begins at Trinity College, Dublin.<sup>12</sup> In addition to excelling in the university's curriculum, he was a founding member of the Trinity 'Club' or 'Academy of *Belles Lettres*', the first such debating society in Britain or Ireland. The Club stressed affective and effective communication, 'the formation of ... minds and manners for the functions of Civil Society'.<sup>13</sup> Its minute-book records debates on the ancients and moderns, Shaftesbury and *The Spectator*, and on 'politeness', 'luxury' and 'improvement'.<sup>14</sup> Although the political climate left some members nervous about the freedom with which issues were discussed, the complications of Irish trade, absenteeism and the contemporaneous Jacobite Rebellion intruded as well.<sup>15</sup> Among the Club's members, Burke included his childhood friend, the Quaker Richard Shackleton. Shackleton, effectively prohibited from graduating from Trinity by the requirement of a religious oath, was thus able to participate in Dublin's civil, if not *civic*, society. If not a radical, the young Burke was not content to remain a mere spectator in public affairs.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of his studies, Burke entered public debate, and numerous Dublin coffee-houses, as founding editor of *The Reformer* (1748).<sup>17</sup> The journal's focus was initially artistic, especially the reform of Dublin theatre. Burke saw the study of aesthetics as having a moral purpose. The *Reformer*'s first number began by stating:

Deprivation of Taste is as great as that of Morals, and tho' the correcting the latter may seem a more laudable Design, and more consistent with public-Spirit; yet there is so strong a Connection between them, and the Morals of a Nation have so great Dependence on their Taste and Writings, that the fixing the latter, seems the first and surest Method of establishing the former.<sup>18</sup>

- 12 Katherine O'Donnell has suggested that, combined with Burke's experiences of Gaelic culture, Trinity was uniquely important in his development as a public speaker. See Katherine O'Donnell, *Edmund Burke and the Heritage of Oral Culture*, Ph.D. (UCC, 2000), especially pp.56-76.
- 13 Included as 'Appendix One' in A.P.I. Samuels, *The Early Life, Correspondence and Writings of the Rt Hon Edmund Burke* (Cambridge, 1923), pp.227-8. The minute-book noted in an interesting, enlightened analogy, that 'Language is the eye of Society'. *Ibid.*, pp.227-8.
- 14 Numerous works of Addison and Shaftesbury are in to be found in Burke's library catalogues.
- 15 See Samuels, *Early Life*, pp.236-8.
- 16 A letter addressed to the Burke-edited *Reformer*, perhaps from Shackleton, notes 'You, Sir, are a *Reformer*, I am a humble *Spectator*'. Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Paul Langford (gen. ed.) (10 vols., Oxford, 1997), i, p.110. See also *ibid.*, i, p.81.
- 17 Much of *The Reformer* is included in *ibid.*, i, pp.66-128. See his jaunt in *Reformer* Number 5.
- 18 Burke, *Writings*, i, p.66.

While there continued to be discussion of the arts, including the encouragement of native arts against English models, the journal's brief quickly extended to wider questions of absenteeism, poverty and improvement.<sup>19</sup> 'Politeness we grant in itself very laudable', Burke wrote, 'but when, by Misapplication, it opposes that greater Virtue *Publick-Spirit* it is liable to the severest Reproach'.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the *Reformer's* thirteen issues, he repeatedly returned to the necessity of joining 'Honour and Interest', specifically commending the 'Dublin Society'.<sup>21</sup>

While successful, a promised second series of the journal never materialised. Instead, under paternal pressure, Burke left to begin legal studies at London's Middle Temple in 1750.<sup>22</sup> The instruction offered in eighteenth-century English Inns of Court was particularly poor and he quickly developed reservations about the 'narrow and inglorious study' he was receiving.<sup>23</sup> A number of minor essays written in this period reveal the importance he accorded a '*versatile ingenium*' and the 'Culture of the mind'.<sup>24</sup> The 'Chief use of Learning,' he wrote,

is to implant an elegant disposition into the mind and manners and root out of them everything sordid, base or illiberal ... the polite arts are rather better calculated for this purpose than any others; and this for the very reason that some condemn them; because they apply to the passions ...

For the mind when it is entertained with high fancies, elegant and polite sentiments, beautiful language, and harmonious sounds, is modelled insensibly into a disposition to elegance and humanity. For it is the bias the mind takes that gives direction to our lives; and not any rules or maxims of morals or behaviour.<sup>25</sup>

The exercise of eloquence was thus both formative and functional. Being 'conversant in all the variety of Arts and Sciences, in the Stories, opinions, Customs, manners, achievements of all ages and all nations' would 'wear away

19 Ibid. On 'social issues', see *Reformer* Number 7, especially, *ibid.*, i, pp.96-8. Note Burke's quote, from Cicero's *De officiis*, that '[o]f all social ties none is stronger, none dearer, than that between each of us and our country.' *Ibid.*, i, p.83. *De officiis*, he wrote elsewhere, was a 'blameless piece'. Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, Thomas W. Copeland (gen. ed.) (10 vols., Cambridge, 1981), i, p.74.

20 Burke, *Writings*, i, p.86.

21 *Ibid.*, i, p.84. See also *ibid.*, i, pp.85 and 93 (on the '*Desire of Lucre*' and the 'Love of Glory').

22 In his Middle Temple notebooks, Burke wrote that the 'Sense of honour & shame does not proceed from any idea of interest'. F(M) A.xxx.6.

23 Burke, *Writings*, i, p.323. Similar criticism led to the introduction of university lectures on the common law at Oxford (William Blackstone, 1758) and Trinity (Francis Stoughton Sullivan, 1761). For Sullivan, see Francis Stoughton Sullivan, *Lectures on the Constitution and Laws of England*, Seán Patrick Donlan (ed.) (forthcoming).

24 'Several scattered hints concerning philosophy and learning collected here from my papers' in H.V.F. Somerset (ed.), *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke: Poems, Characters, Essays and Other Sketches in the Hands of Edmund and William Burke now Printed for the First Time in their Entirety* (Cambridge, 1957), pp.86, 83.

25 *Ibid.*, pp.87-8. Cf 'The character of a fine gentleman' at *ibid.*, pp.104-8.



those little prejudices of little parties'.<sup>26</sup> This emphasis on the passions and on habituation would prove especially important in Burke's later writings. He also underscored the tension between reason and custom. 'There is some general principle operating to produce Customs, that is a more sure guide than our Theories. They are followed indeed often on odd motives, but that does not make them less reasonable or useful.'<sup>27</sup> It was 'reasonable', he noted, to be custom's 'humble servant, but not its slave'.<sup>28</sup>

While law would remain a passion, Burke left the Middle Temple, against the wishes of his father, for a literary career. His first work was the successful but too-subtle parody, *A Vindication of Natural Society, or, A View of the Miseries and Evils Arising to Mankind from Every Species of Artificial Society, in a Letter to Lord \*\*\*\*, by a Late Noble Writer* (1756), in which he criticised the history, deism and primitivism of Henry St John, Lord Bolingbroke. (It was thought to be a work by Bolingbroke, so accurate was the ironic take on his prose.) Behind the work was a complex vision of the natural and historical basis for individual and social progress. This critique was more fully developed in Burke's subsequent works, especially his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which offered an empiricist aesthetics 'founded on experiment'.<sup>29</sup> The 'great originals of all our ideas' were the senses, both common and moral. In this way, the *Enquiry* was at once a falsifiable 'science' of art and of morality. In line with both polite practice and scientific theory, it encouraged a conversational, corporate examination of experience. 'In considering any complex matter', he wrote:

we ought to examine every distinct ingredient in the composition, one by one; and reduce every thing to the utmost simplicity ... We ought afterwards to re-examine the principles by the effect of the composition, as well as the composition by that of the principles ... The greater number of ... comparisons we make, the more general and the more certain our knowledge is like to prove, as built upon a more extensive and perfect induction.<sup>30</sup>

The *Enquiry* provided, in effect, a natural foundation for polite culture and a vindication of artificial society.

The *Enquiry* – and the 'Essay on Taste' added to the second edition of 1759 – intersected with, and complicated, works of politeness and benevolism. Following the lead of Addison, Burke addressed the question of a standard of taste, both aesthetic and moral.<sup>31</sup> Given the similarity of physical bodies,

26 Ibid, p.85.

27 Ibid., p.90. Cf Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, J.T. Boulton (ed.) (London, 1958), p.49.

28 Somerset, *Note-Book*, p.89.

29 Burke, *Enquiry*, p.5.

30 Ibid., p.4. Note also his quotation of the same passage from Cicero (on nature) in Somerset, *Note-Book*, pp.92-3 and Burke, *Enquiry*, p.5.

31 See especially, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, Donald F. Bond (ed.) (6 vols., Oxford, 1965), numbers 409, 411-21.

universal but not entirely uniform, taste was 'nearly common to all'.<sup>32</sup> But where many suggested that the beautiful was pleasant, Burke instead argued that men merely called the physically pleasant beautiful. 'Taste (whatever it is) is improved' by 'attention', 'exercise' and 'cultivation', rather than an exclusive sense or 'mere naked reason'.<sup>33</sup> He was also in broad agreement with Shaftesbury's concentration on 'the works of imagination and the elegant arts'.<sup>34</sup> More important perhaps was his fellow *hiberni* Hutcheson. From moral philosophy, Hutcheson challenged the rationalism and egoism of 'modern' natural lawyers. Trained in the law, Burke consistently leavened the 'vulgar' legalisms of contemporary political and moral theory with an emphasis on variety. Akin to Hutcheson, he presented 'sympathy' as both an empathetic feeling and the underlying biological mechanism that provided a non-rationalist (and non-theistic) explanation of human sociability.<sup>35</sup> More generally, his work was naturalistic, founded in a common psychology and moral sensibility. Its methodology, however, was 'founded on experiment and not assumed', and was in line with contemporary science.<sup>36</sup> As a friend aptly observed, Hutcheson's *Inquiry* was a 'moral' piece, while Burke's *Enquiry* was a 'critical work'.<sup>37</sup>

In the *Enquiry*, Burke wrote that it is by sympathy

that we enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost any thing which men can do or suffer. For sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected ... It is by this principle chiefly that poetry, painting, and other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another, and are often capable of grafting a delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself ... I am afraid it is a practice much too common in inquiries of this nature, to attribute the cause of feelings which merely arise from the mechanical structure of our bodies, or from the natural frame and constitution of our minds, to certain conclusions of the reasoning faculty on the objects present to us; for I should imagine, that the influence of reason in producing our passions is nothing near so extensive as it is commonly believed.<sup>38</sup>

32 Burke, *Enquiry*, p.20. See *ibid.*, pp.13-4.

33 *Ibid.*, pp.25-6.

34 *Ibid.* p.13.

35 Burke saw empiricism as confirming a purposive universe, but was never reliant on God for causal explanations. See *ibid.*, p.48.

36 *Ibid.*, p.5.

37 Cited in Samuels, *Early Life*, p.212. On Burke and Hutcheson, see Terry Eagleton, 'Homage to Francis Hutcheson' in *idem.*, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London, 1995), pp.120-3. On Hutcheson generally, see Michael Brown, *Francis Hutcheson in Dublin, 1719-1730: The Crucible of his Thought* (Dublin, 2002).

38 Burke, *Enquiry*, p.41.



In this way, empiricism provided a dynamic, inter-subjective image of human association that blurred private and public spheres. But because sympathy required real interaction, benevolence was necessarily limited.<sup>39</sup> Physical and cultural contiguity was critical and moral universalism, without attention to such limitations, impractical. Given the importance of habit, families and local communities – Burke's 'little platoons' – were the primary sites of a necessarily sentimental education.<sup>40</sup> What he later called the 'moral constitution of the heart' was an essential, if unchosen and inherently conservative, element in the formation of individual personality and the necessary basis for polite friendships.<sup>41</sup>

While differences in taste and culture were increasingly obvious to eighteenth-century minds, Burke emphasised the underlying similarity of human nature. The 'conformation of their organs are nearly, or altogether the same in all men, so the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same, or with little difference'.<sup>42</sup> Human 'improvement', both individual and social, was possible through natural sympathy, imitation and ambition.<sup>43</sup> This 'ambition', however, had more to do with the honour ethic, than with the market. Without it, there would be an 'eternal circle' where '[m]en must remain as brutes do, the same at the end that they are at this day, and that they were at the beginning of the world'.<sup>44</sup> Such native inclinations were largely negative boundaries to human diversity and imagination, rather than positive guides. As a result, they provided only the most basic gauge of individual and social 'corruption'.<sup>45</sup> There remained considerable latitude for divergent customs and manners. Man's 'second nature', long a concern of both civic and civil humanists, was unavoidably corporate and formative.<sup>46</sup> Given the limits of individual and speculative reason, custom functioned as the cumulative fund for a sort of social 'association of ideas'. These habits were not opposed to individual dispositions, but the necessary and

39 The virtue of benevolence, often impractical and so consequently counterproductive of real good, was contrasted to being 'exactly just'. Somerset, *Note-Book*, pp.114, 113. A similar debate occurred in law.

40 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings of Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, Conor Cruise O'Brien (ed.) (Harmondsworth, 1969), p.135.

41 Ibid., p.176. Cf Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (Indianapolis, 1996), p.135. See also the interesting comments in WWM Bk P 25/57 ('Such philosophy [?] considers man always in relation not solitary rights and duties, but as in communion with the universe ...').

42 Burke, *Enquiry*, p.13.

43 Ibid., p.40.

44 Ibid., p.46.

45 See Burke, *Reflections*, p.183 on 'blind, unmeaning' and 'just' prejudices.

46 Burke, *Enquiry*, p.135. 'Custom', Burke overstated, 'reconciles us to everything'. Ibid., p.135.

necessarily social means by which they were expressed. 'Art', he later wrote, 'was man's nature'.<sup>47</sup>

### III

If the *Enquiry* suggested the natural origins of the polite and the honourable, Burke's histories explored the artificial bases of civil – or *civilised* – society. At the same time he was completing the *Enquiry*, Burke collaborated with Middle Temple fellow William Burke – no relation – on the *Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757).<sup>48</sup> Though dedicated to questions of trade, the *Account* is essentially a work of travel literature, of social geography and history. It explores the 'strange turns of the human mind, fashioned to any thing by custom'.<sup>49</sup> Amerindian virtues included an intense loyalty to family and place and there were '[f]riendships ... fit to vie with those of fabulous antiquity'.<sup>50</sup> But the depth of this hospitality was mirrored in their hostility when aroused. The torture practiced by the Amerindians showed

to what an inconceivable degree of barbarity the passions of men let loose will carry them. It will point out to us the advantages of a religion that teaches a compassion to our enemies, ... and it will make us more sensible than some appear to be of the value of commerce, the arts of a civilized life, and the lights of literature ...<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the Amerindian societies were not simply at an earlier stage of universal history comparable to early Europeans, but rather a corrupted society prohibiting progress. Yet, while the Burkes suggest the degree to which Europe had achieved a comparatively flourishing society, they do not dismiss the European role in Amerindian corruption, or their own savagery.<sup>52</sup> The 'manners of Europe', they noted, before the serendipitous 'spirit of discovery' initiated by Columbus 'were

47 Edmund Burke, *The Works and Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, Walker King, Charles William, Earl Fitzwilliam and Sir Richard Bourke (eds.) (8 vols., London, 1852), iv, p.466.

48 C.f. Edmund Burke, 'On the Employment of Savages in the American War', listed as a proof on Reel 25 of *Politics in the Age of Revolution, 1715-1848 – Part I: The Papers of Edmund Burke, 1729-1797, from Sheffield Archives, Sheffield Libraries and Information Services and Northamptonshire Record Office* (Marlborough, 1994, no archive number given).

49 Edmund Burke and William Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (London, 1766), i, p.181. Citations to volume one are made from the 1766 printing, those to volume two to that of 1758 (2nd ed., London, 1758).

50 *Ibid.*, i, pp.168-9.

51 *Ibid.*, i, p.185.

52 See Luke Gibbons, "'Subtilized into Savages": Edmund Burke, Progress and Primitivism', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100 (2001), pp.83 and especially 87-8.



wholly barbarous' and 'there were but very faint marks of cultivation and politeness'.<sup>53</sup>

Edmund's unpublished and aborted *Abridgement of the English History* (c.1757-62) presents a surprisingly similar analysis of the early English. The work, which ends with the Magna Carta, portrays them as a 'rude and barbarous' people whose liberty was little more than license.<sup>54</sup> Burke noted, speaking of the Roman governor Agricola, that he 'subdued the Britains by civilizing them; and made them exchange a savage liberty for a polite and easy subjection'.<sup>55</sup> After Rome's withdrawal from Britain, the English were again corrupted and, before the Norman conquest, were among the 'most backward in Europe in all improvements'.<sup>56</sup> They were a 'people without learning, without arts, without industry, solely pleased and occupied with war, neglecting agriculture, abhorring cities, and seeking their livelihood only from pasturage and hunting'.<sup>57</sup> In a climate that glorified the insular and immemorial nature of English law, Burke wrote that

the present system of our laws, like our language and our learning, is a very mixed and heterogeneous mass, in some respects our own; in more borrowed from the policy of foreign nations, and compounded, altered, and variously modified, according to the various necessities which the manners, the religion, and the commerce of the people have at different times imposed.<sup>58</sup>

With the Norman invasion, Burke proclaimed that 'English law, manners and maxims were suddenly changed; the scene was enlarged; and the communication with the rest of Europe being thus opened, has been preserved ever since'.<sup>59</sup> Against contemporary Whig and Patriot histories, those of his allies and acquaintances, Burke highlighted English improvement through its 'communication', its social commerce, with the continent.

For this progress, the corporate orders of Europe were in a great measure responsible. At their best, Burke recognised the nobility as the 'Corinthian capital

53 Burke and Burke, *Account*, i, pp.4, 4, 4, 5. The Burkes repeatedly suggested positive, serendipitous development. In his English history, too, Burke would note that '[t]he science may be false, or frivolous; the improvement will be real'. Burke, *Writings*, i, p.402.

54 Burke, *Writings*, i, p.430. The phrase 'rude and barbarous' was a trope long in use about the Irish. See, for example, Seán Patrick Donlan, "'Little Better than Canibals': Property and Progress in Sir John Davies and Edmund Burke", *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly*, 54 (2003), pp.1-24.

55 Burke, *Writings*, i, p.368. See also WWM Bk P 27/46 (on conquest and law) and Somerset, *Note-Book*, p.119 (on Voltaire and conquest).

56 Burke, *Writings*, i, p.428.

57 *Ibid.*, i, p.429. England had been 'little known or considered in Europe'. *Ibid.*, i, p.453.

58 *Ibid.*, i, p.325.

59 *Ibid.*, i, p.453.

of polished society'.<sup>60</sup> Against 'enlightened' prejudices, he underscored, too, the role of the clergy.<sup>61</sup> 'The little learning', he wrote: 'which then subsisted, remained wholly in their hands ... They were the statesmen, they were the lawyers; from them were often taken the bailiffs of the seigneurial courts, sometimes the Sheriffs of counties, and almost constantly the Justiciaries of the kingdom.' Some thirty years before the revolution in France, he noted:

In abbeys the law was studied; abbeys were the palladiums of the public liberty by the custody of the royal charters and most of the records. Thus, necessary to the great by their knowledge; venerable to the poor by their hospitality; dreadful to all by the power of excommunication; the character of the clergy was exalted above every thing in the State; and it could no more be otherwise in those days, than it is possible it should be so in ours.<sup>62</sup>

As inheritors of 'polite antiquity', including Roman and canon law, the learning of European clergy – to which Ireland made no small contribution – made them essential to the cultivation of Enlightenment.<sup>63</sup> In addition to acting as trustees of 'social capital', the Christian clergy's gradual taming of more martial virtues was of great significance to modern Europe. Like custom generally, gallantry and piety were often false, but the unintended effect was genuine improvement.<sup>64</sup> In general, the universal church 'preserved that intercourse amongst mankind, which is now formed by politicks, commerce and learned curiosity'.<sup>65</sup>

During the time of writing his English history, Burke was also often in Dublin as personal secretary to William Hamilton, then Irish chief secretary. While there, he became actively involved in quelling the Dublin government's reaction to the so-called 'Whiteboy disturbances', in which Catholic members of his extended family were implicated. He also engaged in debates on Irish history and historiography, siding with Irish Catholic historians Charles O'Connor of

60 Ibid., i, p.499; Burke, *Reflections*, pp.141, 245. When 'sustained by a generous love of fame' they 'temper[ed] honour with prudence'. Burke, *Letters*, p.269. See WWM Bk P 27/105 (on 'nobility'), 27/206 (on 'Aristocracy rightly understood').

61 To a sceptic he recommended the work of Bishop Joseph Butler and, even more strongly, the 'more popular works such as may be found in Addison's *Spectator*'. From 'Christian religion: answer of Mr B to a message he received at Bath from a sceptic', WWM Bk P 26/40. Also included in Mrs Crewe, 'Extracts from Mr Burke's Table Talk', *Miscellanies of the Philobiblon Society*, 7 (1862-3), pp.1, 53-9. Burke's religion was a sort of corporate natural religion, emphasising broad public tolerance and the limits of the 'enthusiasms' of both solipsistic reason and revelation.

62 Burke, *Writings*, i, pp.501-2. The 'first openings of civility have been every where made by religion'. Ibid., i, p.349.

63 Ibid., i, pp.398, 399. They 'were in effect the Saxon legislators'. Ibid., i, p.330.

64 Even an event like the 'phrenzy' of the Crusades, 'served to unite Europe as a body', promoting the communication of the arts and sciences. Ibid., i, pp.483, 481.

65 Ibid., i, p.399.



Belanagare and Dr John Curry against English and Scottish contemporaries.<sup>66</sup> Burke was especially incensed by David Hume's portrayal of the native Irish as savages, 'consider[ing] himself ... as referred to on the subject'.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Burke's famed insistence on the importance of 'manners' over laws or preoccupation with institutions may owe something to his Irish experiences.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the idea of a civilised Irish past before the Anglo-Norman invasion may, when combined with Greek and Roman models, explain the elements of cyclical history that remained in his thought and were such an important element of the analysis in the *Reflections*. Drawing heavily on the thought of O'Connor, Burke's *Tracts on the Popery Laws* (c.1765), again unpublished and aborted, critiques both the indignity and injustice of the laws and their disutility, particularly in their restrictions on Catholic ownership of land. Discussing the Catholic proclivity towards 'superstition', he observed:

society not only exists, but flourishes at this hour with this superstition, in many Countries, under every form of Government; in some established, in some tolerated; in others, upon an equal footing. And was there no civil society at all in these kingdoms before the Revolution? ... They are now excluded from those [public] benefits; and so far as civil society comprehends them, and as we have managed the matter, our persecutions are so far from being necessary to its existence, that our very Reformation is made in a degree noxious. If this be improvement, truly I know not what can be called a depravation of society.<sup>69</sup>

He criticised, too, the 'miserable performances which go about under the names of Histories of Ireland' and lamented that those Irish who ought to share a common sense of community were, in a perversion of moral sentiments, volunteers against one other.<sup>70</sup>

#### IV

Before his entry into parliament, Burke had already made more than one essay into the history of civil society. As an MP for Wendover, the trading city of Bristol, and finally Malton, his attentions turned from social to economic commerce. But the two remained closely connected. In debates on the liberalisation of Irish trade, he pointed to the benefits of Scotland's union with England and Wales. Even if Scotland, 'paid nothing at all', he said, 'we should be

66 See generally, Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate on the Celtic Past in Ireland and Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, Ph.D. (University of Cambridge, 1991).

67 Robert Bisset, *Life of Edmund Burke* (2nd ed., 2 vols., London, 1800), ii, pp.425-6.

68 See Burke, *Writings*, iii, p.299.

69 *Ibid.*, ix, p.468. Citing Cicero, the 'the chief end of all men' ought to be 'to make the interest of each individual and of the whole body politic identical'. Cicero, *De officiis*, iii.26 in Burke, *Writings*, ix, p.456.

70 *Ibid.*, ix, p.478. See *ibid.*, ix, p.461.

gainers, not losers by acquiring the hearty co-operation of an active intelligent people'.<sup>71</sup> In parallel with many Scottish thinkers, Burke believed commerce, law and polite manners – and through this virtue and liberty – to be mutually reinforcing. In Ireland, a union of manners and commerce, if not necessarily law, with Britain was necessary if both were not to become 'barbarised'.<sup>72</sup> By establishing 'free trade' he hoped both to eliminate Britain's economic monopoly over Ireland and erode the social dominance of what would soon be called the Irish 'Ascendancy'. Re-appropriating what the Tory Bolingbroke had taken from Whig commonwealthmen, Burke employed elements of the civic critique in his writings and speeches on America, India, France, Ireland and the crown. He continued to insist, as he had as the *Reformer*, on the importance of '*publick-Spirit*'. With many who doubted the public virtue of monied men, Burke saw aristocracy and landed property as the basis for economic commerce, just as polite culture rested on the honour ethic. The artificial institutions of European culture and society, of gentlemen and indeed religious, were the necessary foundation of an enlightened society.<sup>73</sup>

If the Irish élite were corrupted by 'jobbery', the English aristocracy generally enjoyed a better reputation. With membership in the Rockingham Whigs, Burke seemed to find a political union of the polite and the honourable. His own defence of 'party' merged ancient and modern, Cicero and Addison, and claimed that earlier Whigs had 'believed private honour to be the great foundation of public trust; that friendship was no mean step towards patriotism'.<sup>74</sup> The Rockingham Whigs, mediating between the classical 'tyrannies' of monarchy or democracy, the one and the many, were similarly 'grafting public principles on private honour'.<sup>75</sup> In this marriage of political and moral economies, they saw themselves reconciling the energy and commerce of the 'natural' aristocracy with the stability and public virtue of a hereditary aristocracy. While insisting on the united efforts of the 'landed and commercial' interests, Burke noted that 'Country Gentlemen' were 'the anchors of the state. They are fixed in the land'.<sup>76</sup> As the duke of Bedford would later discover, however, Burke's defence of aristocracy was not fawning, but functional.<sup>77</sup> His belief in the senatorial independence of MPs also reflected both this patrician ethic and the often

71 Ibid., ix, p.511.

72 Ibid., ix, p.487.

73 From the 'Fragment' in *ibid.*, i, p.322.

74 Ibid., ii, p.316. He quotes Addison's 'The Campaign' on 'friendship's holy ties'. Ibid.

75 Ibid., iii, pp.324-5.

76 *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803* (30 vols., London, 1816), xvii, pp.479, 479, unnumbered in Reel 25 of *Politics in the Age of Revolution*.

77 See Edmund Burke, 'Letter to a Noble Lord' in Burke, *Writings*, ix, pp.145-87. 'Wealth [was] the most invidious of all distinctions therefore Nobility brought in'. 'Between the ancient order of Europe', WWM Bk P 10/96.



reactionary reality of much mid-century populism (on issues like slavery, trade, criminal law, religious tolerance and the reform of *British* penal laws). Events like the Gordon riots and the similarly anti-Catholic riots of Scotland that preceded them, were the antithesis of polite politics. If Rockinghamite reformism and the obligations of honour it presupposed were admittedly imperfect, they had a genuine if meliorist record of improvement.<sup>78</sup>

Friend and fellow Irishman Oliver Goldsmith spoke for many who believed that Burke's entry into politics meant one 'born for the universe narrow'd his mind,/And to party gave up what was meant for mankind?'<sup>79</sup> Burke continued, however, to maintain the friendships he believed so important in politics with many who disagreed with his own, not least the Tories Goldsmith, James Boswell, Samuel Johnson and Henry Dundas. With Boswell and Johnson, Burke was an original member of the 'Literary Club' which, meeting at London's Turk's Head, included Goldsmith, Joshua Reynolds and Adam Smith. Burke also entertained at his country estate at Beaconsfield in the company of David Garrick, Fanny Burney and Elizabeth Montagu.<sup>80</sup> In these relationships and in his role as editor of the encyclopaedic *Annual Register* (c.1758-67), he was an especially active participant in the conversational culture of eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>81</sup>

Burke was also close to a number of Scottish thinkers and politicians.<sup>82</sup> He was far more suspicious, however, than were his Scottish associates of discrete stages of progress. He was equally sceptical about the prioritisation of commerce over manners and consequently remained far more supportive of the virtues of primogeniture, landed property and the moral economy. One of the more interesting of these relationships was with the historian William Robertson, who both praised and borrowed from the Burkes' *Account*. On receipt of Robertson's *History of America* (1777), Burke responded:

78 'Puffendorf, and other casuists do not, I think, denominate it quite properly, when they call it a duty of imperfect obligation'. Burke, *Writings*, ix, p.129.

79 'Retaliation' in Oliver Goldsmith, *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, Arthur Friedman (ed.) (5 vols., Oxford, 1966), iv, pp.353-4. Indeed, Goldsmith wrote that Burke was 'too fond of the right to pursue the expedient'. Ibid., p.354. Quoted in agreement by James Boswell in his *Life of Johnson* (1791; Oxford, 1998), p.334.

80 Burke also attempted, without much success, to act the role of 'improving' landlord and corresponded with the agriculturalist Arthur Young, whose *Tour of Ireland* (1780) he may have influenced. See L.M. Cullen, 'Burke's Irish Views and Writings' in Ian Crowe (ed.), *Edmund Burke: His Life and Legacy* (Dublin, 1997), p.71.

81 See generally Donald Cross Bryant, *Edmund Burke and his Literary Friends* (St Louis, 1939). The *Annual Register* collected pieces on current events, state papers, essays on the arts, reports on the sciences, extracts from Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau, etc., as well as Burke's book reviews.

82 See Seán Patrick Donlan, "'An Active Intelligent People': Edmund Burke's Scottish Enlightenment", *History-Scotland*, 3:4 (2003), pp.32-8 and idem, "'Our Barr does not Abound in General Erudition": Edmund Burke's Scottish Enlightenment', *Studies in Burke and his Time*, forthcoming.

we possess at this time very great advantages towards the knowledge of human Nature. We need no longer go to History to trace it in all its stages and periods ... now the Great Map of Mankind is unrolld at once; and there is no state or Gradation of barbarism, and no mode of refinement which we have not at the same instant under our View.<sup>83</sup>

With this ‘great map’ before them, Burke and other Europeans were increasingly required to explain the diversity of manners and the ‘different modes of refinement’ they were encountering around the world.

Burke’s ultimately failed, fourteen-year impeachment of Warren Hastings for his actions as governor-general of India brought these questions into particularly sharp focus. His analysis of India, as with Ireland and America, underscored the colonial corruption of both colonised and colonisers. His criticism of the influence exerted by the Indian Nabobs on British politics, especially after the Whig election debacle of 1784, was classic ‘civic’ criticism.<sup>84</sup> But ‘civil’ language also played a role. Indians were, he told the House of Lords, a ‘people for ages civilised and cultivated – cultivated by all the arts of polished life, whilst we were yet in the woods’.<sup>85</sup> Drawing on the work of another associate, the jurist-orientalist William Jones, he defended Hindu and Muslim law as conforming both to Indian manners and to natural law as English justice could not.<sup>86</sup> The impeachment thus afforded the opportunity to discuss again the progress of English law. Jurisprudence had, he argued, through corresponding changes in commerce and manners, made a reformation of its ‘antique Rigour and over-done Severity’ as ‘Commerce with its Advantages and its Necessities opened a Communication more largely with other Countries, as the Law of Nature and Nations (always a Part of the Law of *England*) came to be cultivated; as an increasing Empire; [and] as new Views and Combination of Things were opened ...’<sup>87</sup> Progress in Europe was the product of society and of sociability between individuals and nations. ‘Communication’ was a vital element in the progress of the manners, commerce and law of the entire continent, not least in England.

## V

Read in light of these early writings and speeches, Burke’s anti-revolutionary rhetoric acquires additional depth. He was not wholly uncritical of the *ancien régime*, ‘that system of Court Intrigue miscalled a Government as it stood, at Versailles before the present confusions’.<sup>88</sup> But with many of his contemporaries, he employed ‘chivalry’ as a term of art signifying the complex European union of

83 Burke, *Correspondence*, iii, pp.350-1. Cf *Annual Register* (1777), p.215 (second pagination).

84 See Burke, *Writings*, v, p.402.

85 Ibid., v, p.389. See also *ibid.*, v, pp.389-90.

86 See Jones ‘Institutes of Menu’ in F(M) A.xxxv.8A.

87 Burke, *Writings*, vii, p.163.

88 Burke, *Correspondence*, vi, p.479.



manners. It was not a defence of the past, but of his present, of a social order he perceived as being more progressive and enlightened perhaps than any in history.<sup>89</sup> In the *Reflections*, he observed:

Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles: and were indeed the result of both combined: I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion.<sup>90</sup>

In notes of the period, Burke wrote that revolutionary philosophy left 'no other principle of restraint but terror. No other incentive but personal interest.'<sup>91</sup> It was this reduction of human association to power and interest, uncomplicated by any natural or even artificial sympathies, that he saw as the French 'revolution in ... politeness'.<sup>92</sup> In their attempts to new-model the entire social and political order, the revolutionaries threatened the progress of centuries with 'a sort of artificial ignorance & systematic barbarism'.<sup>93</sup> For:

When trade and manufacturers are wanting to a people, and the spirit of nobility and religion remains, sentiment supplies, and not always ill supplies their place; but if commerce and the arts should be lost in an experiment to try how well a state may stand without these old fundamental principles, what sort of thing must be a nation of gross, stupid, ferocious, and at the same time, poor and sordid barbarians, destitute of religion, honour, or manly pride, possessing nothing at present, and hoping for nothing hereafter.<sup>94</sup>

- 89 See Burke, *Writings*, i, p.495. In chivalry, 'Ambition, interest, glory, all concurred'. Anonymous, 'The Rise of Chivalry' in *Annual Register* (1762), p.135 (second pagination).
- 90 Burke, *Reflections*, p.173. See generally *ibid.*, pp.169-75.
- 91 In WWM BK P 25/57. 'The refined state of Europe in a great measure due to [chivalry]....' Cf Burke, *Writings*, i, p.456.
- 92 Burke, *Reflections*, pp.162-3. Others have noted that Burke believed that this was not simply a product of *philosophes* attacking religion, but an assault of 'the monied and the mercantile world' on landed property, both fuelled by the press that had made politeness possible. Burke, *Letters*, p.186. See also especially, J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution' in *idem.*, *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays in Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), pp.193-212; *idem.*, 'Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution' in François Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture: Volume 3, The Transformation of Political Culture 1789-1848* (Oxford, 1989), pp.19-43.
- 93 '(Letter) On a French plan of judicature', F(M) A.iv.74. See Burke, *Letters*, p.228 (on the 'cannibal Republic') and Burke, *Writings*, viii, pp.462-3 (on the French 'savages').
- 94 Burke, *Reflections*, p.174. See also *ibid.*, pp.174-6.

In July 1797, after requesting Addison's 'On Immortality', Burke died at Beaconsfield.<sup>95</sup> In Dublin coffee-houses, London clubs and salons, and at his English country estate, he exemplified much of the civil society that ended with the Revolution he so virulently opposed.

95 See Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*, number 111 ('On immortality; beautiful speculation tending to establish its probability from the fact of unlimited progressiveness of the soul towards perfection'). Burke died without an heir – his son having predeceased him by two years – and the peerage it might have meant.